



Music Teaching and Learning Among Traditional Musicians

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Some of you know that I find strong connections between learning music and learning language. I'm going to delve into this a little more.

The information here is based on my formal and informal (participatory) study of traditional musicians. Mostly Appalachian.

Traditional musicians--people who learn in informal settings and without printed music for the most part--learn to play and sing music in a way that is very like the way people learn language.

When we consider these ways of learning, we are adding strategies to our teaching.



Learning Environments

One of the first differences is learning environments.



This is the familiar formalized music learning environment--printed music, a teacher, a special and regular period of time for music learning.



Traditional musicians tend to learn in social environments--where they are playing with more advanced people--as in Vygotsky. Approximation is encouraged. Like the obviously supportive music teacher in the last slide, the other members of this jam welcome a young person playing and support his efforts so he can be successful. Not that these folks have studied Vygotsky--they are doing the same thing that parents do when kids are learning to talk.



Younger people learn from older people and when younger folks start getting serious, they may visit the people they admire so they can learn more. This is as close as it gets to a private lesson.



Traditional musicians use available technologies for learning, including listening to music on the radio and remembering the tunes so they could practice themselves. When multiple speed phonographs became available, they used those and slowed their records down so they could better learn the music.

Early televised shows of bluegrass almost always included closeups on the person taking the solo break, so that viewers could see banjo rolls, guitar fingerings, and so forth.



Instrument and Technique



Music is an important part of the culture--it was a major form of entertainment. Live musicians are prized the most, so people who learn to play music have status in the community. This makes music a desirable thing to learn, hence the common solution to not having an instrument: make your own. Frequently these are made out of cigar boxes, using various types of wire for strings (e.g., out of a screen door). The bow typically has horse hair and tree sap is used for rosin. Imagine if our students wanted to play so badly they created their own instrument!



Paul and the "Appalachian Suzuki program." His dad making own fiddle as a youngster.



Technique varies considerably. Some hold their instruments as classical violinists do. Others play with the violin off the shoulder completely. The focus is on the ability to play music, however that physically happens. Bow holds also vary.

Classical has this--there are varied techniques, since every violin teacher wanted to change my bow hold. Began with Russian bow hold now use modified Galamian. Each teacher felt there was one way to hold the bow--but I knew of excellent violinists who had different bow holds.



Concepts of Music

Traditional musicians' concepts about music can be very different from the classical approach.



Oral Tradition. This is common when cultures depend less on various kinds of literacy and more on oral culture. Stories are a major way of passing information along, however as they get told and retold, they get changed because there is no permanent (e.g., written) record of the original.

Kind of like the game where you sit in a circle and pass along a message.



Like stories, songs get changed through oral transmission. The traditional ballads of Appalachia have also been found in England, but in somewhat different forms. Oxford Girl Knoxville Girl. Verses jump from one song into another--who will shoe your pretty little foot.



Tunes also get changed. There are essential features of tunes that are commonly retained but different ways of getting to and from the essential features.

Soldier's Joy (play fiddle)



Along with changes in music due to oral tradition, traditional musicians tend to have a very different understanding of melody in relation to harmony.




In classical music, we are aware of every note in the scale and it's melodic and harmonic function. Our ability to memorize complex pieces of music--violin concerti--is based on us being able to "chunk" the music through this understanding.



Traditional musicians tend to focus primarily on chords. They know the names of chords but often they do not know the names of the individual notes that make up the chord. They will know a G chord, and they will be able to play the notes that "go with" a G chord, but they frequently don't know that B and D are part of the G chord.

This is a fundamentally different concept because it means that when playing a melody, as long as the notes are in the chord and the essential features are played, this counts for being able to identify the melody. If a tune has a passing feature that uses D, you might hear other versions of the same tune that use B in the same spot.

This is one reason tunes change--because notes within a chord can be substituted for other notes in that chord. It allows people to come up with their own versions of tunes.



Applying Traditional Musicians' Learning to Classical Music Teaching

Here are some of the ways in which these ideas can be relevant to us teachers.

I have created a program that is largely based on traditional ways of learning music (but also including classical). I have had the privilege of watching students become highly motivated and competent musicians with these teaching techniques.



Music is primarily a form of social communication between people. Sitting at home by oneself practicing does take place in classical and traditional cultures. But the social also has to be part of it. This is why school music groups are so important.



Music technology is a scaffold for learning music and students should be encouraged to use it. Today's traditional musicians benefit from youtube videos, mp3 files, and software such as the Amazing Slow Downer.



Beginning musicians approximate, just as this is an approximation of a violin. Approximations aren't wrong and they do not lead to "bad technique." Just as children learn to speak conventional language, students learning instruments will become more and more conventional and able. The social aspects of music help this process--students see a more advanced student playing something they want to play. This is a very powerful form of motivation because it's the same motivation that causes an infant to master most of the conventions of language in three years.



Technique is not an end in itself--it is a means of making meaning. Just as children refine their talking "technique" in order to become more understandable, they refine their musical technique so they can play the music they want to play. Megan and the bow.



Learning by ear (really by eye and ear) is an important way to gain competency.

Learning music by reading it requires the step of translating from one semiotic or meaning making system to another. In this case, it is using the semiotic system of written music and translating that into the semiotic system of musical sounds. This step can be very difficult for some children--difficult enough that they might quit.

Additionally, students can learn from more advanced peers and those peers can inspire the desire to learn music. This is actually something that can be manipulated by teachers--I have "antirecitals" and jam sessions where students can hear what others are doing so they will be inspired.



For every musical tradition, there are ways of understanding music. Sometimes it's simply a semantic difference--like the difference between chord identifiers based on Roman numerals in contrast to Nashville numbers that are written in our standard Arabic notation. Sometimes it is a fundamentally different way of "getting" music. When we are open to figuring out these other understandings, we are also gaining new ways to teach.



It's really hard to let go when allowing social forces to shape young musicians, and I do have crises of faith on occasion, when I worry about whether students are getting what they need to play well. Often when I have one of those worries, I will see some kind of advancement in a student and realize that the language approach to teaching music really does work.

Fundamentally, music is about connecting with others--fellow musicians and people listening. Keeping meaning first rather than technique is highly motivating for teachers and students. This is the way traditional musicians learn and adapting these ways into classical teaching can be effective and motivating for youngsters.